

“Imitation Knotty Pine”

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Artists and art historians are equally engaged in interpreting the past, though what appears in history books and on museum walls is not always what motivates studio work. Indeed, one might suggest that artists construct the past they need—or desire—based on the images they tack to corkboards or the individuals and sensibilities they freely acknowledge in their work.

“Imitation Knotty Pine,” organized by noted Memphis sculptor Greely Myatt, took its title and inspiration from H. C. Westermann’s canonical 1996 sculpture. Less about influence than license, the exhibition provided the occasion for several artists to reflect on Westermann’s idiosyncratic art and to remind us of his ongoing importance for studio practice. His work effortlessly combined the obsessive detail of the self-taught with the symbolic form of Modernist art, while his life was equal parts honest autobiography and cagey mythmaking. Both the art and the life provided inspiration for many of the artists in the exhibition.



Stephen Crump, *Remember Me Fondly*.

The front room was dominated by Stephen Crump’s woodworking tour de force, *Remember Me Fondly*. Carved and constructed from Deodora cedar, the sculpture was made from a tree recently felled in the artist’s yard during a violent windstorm that devastated Memphis in July 2003. Constructed on an angle with a skill Westermann would have admired, Crump’s box transformed Westermann’s coffin motif into a fitting tomb for a fallen friend. The trompe-l’oeil pine cones and branch on top

served as remembrance for the deceased.

Across the room, William T. Wiley’s cardboard boxes with the figure of a portly Punch greeting the New Year ruminated on the collusion of capitalism and imperialism in recent events. The figure, like that alluded to in Tom Lee’s *Oh Daddy Why Not!!!!*, recalls Westermann’s use of self to comment on the plight of men in a hostile world. Where the girth of Wiley’s figure announced a satirical intention, the barrel-chested, limbless torso of *Oh Daddy*, brought home Westermann’s pride and anxiety in having served in two wars. Linking these works were the specters of death and destruction, whether of men or materiel.

“Imitation Knotty Pine” joins several recent exhibitions in remembering Westermann’s art and life. Rather than using the retrospective format to measure and assess his accomplishment, however, these artists insisted that his art lives on in their own, thereby writing a past that remains legible in the present.